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ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses strategies for reducing repetition of grades by students at primary, secondary, and higher education levels. Large numbers of pupils repeat their grades every year, and these repetition rates are considered good indicators of an educational system's effectiveness. A high repetition rate indicates that a large number of pupils have not reached the level of learning achievement expected of them. Causes of repetition are varied and not easily detectable and probably vary from one country to another, within a country, from school to school, and from one educational level to another. Some strategies for reducing repetition are targeted at the children and their home environment; others are more closely related to the school, the content, and the teaching methods; and still others have to do with the overall policy and system. The author warns against any drastic legal type of intervention and argues in favor of combining various measures so as to arrive at a comprehensive, multipronged strategy. (Contains 63 references.) (DFR)

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ED 445 406

Fundamentals of Educational Planning

55

Reducing repetition: issues and strategies

Thomas Owen Eisemon

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Reducing repetition: issues and strategies

Thomas Owen Eisemon

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Fundamentals of educational planning

The booklets in this series are written primarily for two types of clientele: those engaged in educational planning and administration, in developing as well as developed countries; and others, less specialized, such as senior government officials and policy-makers who seek a more general understanding of educational planning and of how it is related to overall national development. They are intended to be of use either for private study or in formal training programmes.

Since this series was launched in 1967 practices and concepts of educational planning have undergone substantial change. Many of the assumptions which underlay earlier attempts to rationalise the process of educational development have been criticised or abandoned. Even if rigid mandatory centralized planning has now clearly proven to be inappropriate, this does not mean that all forms of planning have been dispensed with. On the contrary, the need for collecting data, evaluating the efficiency of existing programmes, undertaking a wide range of studies, exploring the future and fostering broad debate on these bases to guide educational policy and decision-making has become even more acute than before.

The scope of educational planning has been broadened. In addition to the formal system of education, it is now applied to all other important educational efforts in non-formal settings. Attention to the growth and expansion of educational systems is being complemented and sometimes even replaced by a growing concern for the quality of the entire educational process and for the control of its results. Finally, planners and administrators have become more and more aware of the importance of implementation strategies and of the role of different regulatory mechanisms in this respect: the choice of financing methods, the examination and certification procedures or various other regulation and incentive structures. The concern of planners is twofold: to reach a better understanding of the validity of education in its own empirically observed specific dimensions and to help in defining appropriate strategies for change.

The purpose of these booklets includes monitoring the evolution and change in educational policies and their effect upon educational planning requirements; highlighting current issues of educational planning and analysing them in the context of their historical and societal setting; and disseminating methodologies of planning which can be applied in the context of both the developed and the developing countries.

In order to help the Institute identify the real up-to-date issues in educational planning and policy-making in different parts of the world, an Editorial Board has been appointed, composed of two general editors and associate editors from different regions, all professionals of high repute in their own field. At the first meeting of this new Editorial Board in January 1990, its members identified key topics to be covered in the coming issues under the following headings:

1. Education and development.
2. Equity considerations.
3. Quality of education.
4. Structure, administration and management of education.
5. Curriculum.
6. Cost and financing of education.
7. Planning techniques and approaches.
8. Information systems, monitoring and evaluation.

Each heading is covered by one or two associate editors.

The series has been carefully planned but no attempt has been made to avoid differences or even contradictions in the views expressed by the authors. The Institute itself does not wish to impose any official doctrine. Thus, while the views are the responsibility of the authors and may not always be shared by UNESCO or the IIEP, they warrant attention in the international forum of ideas. Indeed, one of the purposes of this series is to reflect a diversity of experience and opinions by giving different authors from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines the opportunity of expressing their views on changing theories and practices in educational planning.

This booklet is about reducing repetition at primary, secondary and higher education levels. Large numbers of pupils repeat their grades every year. Repetition rates are normally considered as a good indicator of the effectiveness of an educational system. If these rates are high, this means that a large number of pupils have not reached the level of learning achievement which is expected of them. Yet the causes of such repetition can be varied and are not always easily detectable, nor is it easy to foresee the consequences on a pupil's future learning or career. The causes and consequences probably vary from one country to another, within a country, from school to school, and from one educational level to another. Since large amounts of resources are involved each year in enrolling pupils who are simply going to repeat the same grade, many planners and policy-makers are wondering whether this is really an effective measure and how such wastage could possibly be reduced.

This booklet, prepared by Thomas Owen Eisemon, discusses at length various strategies for reducing repetition. Some of these are targeted at the children and their home environment; others are more closely related to the school, the content and the teaching methods, others again have to do with the overall policy and system. The author rightly warns the reader against any drastic legal type of intervention and argues in favour of combining various measures so as to arrive at a comprehensive multi-pronged strategy, more likely to have a lasting effect. No-one but Thomas Owen Eisemon, who undertook research on a number of countries whilst at MacGill University, and more recently at the World Bank, could have written such a clear, interesting and balanced booklet.

Jacques Hallak
Assistant Director-General, UNESCO
Director, IIEP

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Preface

Repetition rates can reach very high levels in some countries. According to the 1995 World Education Report of UNESCO, the proportion of repeaters in primary education was higher than 20 per cent in some 22 countries, and in six countries more than one pupil out of three was actually repeating. If one adds that many of those repeating end up dropping out, this gives an idea of the extent of the problem. Considerable resources are spent in different countries on forcing pupils to repeat their grades; thus planners and policy-makers are concerned with identifying ways of reducing such a phenomenon. The issue is not as simple as it appears at first sight, however, and it is not only a question of deciding to reduce the rates. Policy measures to reduce or eliminate repetition cannot be successfully designed unless the reasons for such high repetition are known.

Repeating is in fact an issue which is highly debated among educationalists. There are several dimensions to this question. An economic dimension as was just referred to: asking 20 to 40 per cent of pupils to repeat considerably increases the number of pupils to be accommodated every year and this is very expensive. Several economists have tried to estimate how many more pupils could be enrolled within the same budget framework were repetition to be abolished. But another important dimension of repetition is the pedagogical one: those who are asked to repeat are those who are – for one reason or another – not considered as having reached the level of attainment which would allow them to continue their studies in a higher grade. Making them repeat is meant to allow them to catch up, while others continue at their own pace. Yet, several studies seem to indicate that repeating is not an appropriate answer to pupils' low educational achievements. The third dimension is psychological: the threat of repetition is the instrument that many teachers use to keep pupils in line. It also has the advantage of passing the burden of the responsibility of the failure on to the pupils themselves rather than to the teachers, to the school or to the system. Teachers lacking experience on how to handle heterogeneous classes are often reluctant

to reduce repetition and some children are asked to repeat even in countries which have officially adopted a policy of automatic promotion. A fourth dimension of the question is policy related: in many countries which cannot afford to open access to secondary, or higher education, repetition is used as an instrument of flow regulation: those who cannot pass a highly selective examination the first time are given a second chance through repetition: restricting this possibility would be badly received by both parents and students. Another proof of this systemic dimension is the fact that repetition rates are much higher in some countries, amongst which southern European countries and developing countries influenced by this tradition (Francophone and Lusophone Africa as well as Latin America), than elsewhere. Northern European countries and developing countries influenced by the British tradition, on the other hand, have tended to opt for low repetition or automatic promotion. Again, there is no evidence that pupils in the first group of countries have a higher level of achievement than pupils in the other group of countries.

The present monograph written by Thomas Eisemon starts by reviewing the magnitude of repetition in different countries and discusses the relationship between repetition and drop out, two closely related phenomena. The author then analyses the diverse causes of repetition: some are linked to the child and family characteristics, others to the teaching/learning conditions in the school and to teachers' practices, and others to the system itself and the policy implemented. The author argues that certain countries have developed a culture of repetition, whereby it is considered normal to have high repetition. To reduce the extent of the phenomenon, systemic measures are required. The last chapter focuses on policy options and countries' experiences.

This booklet has several strengths: first the author covers all the issues at stake in a very clear and straightforward manner, avoiding any simplified, across-the-board statements which could give the impression that it is a simple issue to tackle. Second, the author draws examples from a variety of developing countries each with a different history and tradition, and this allows him to have a very balanced view of the phenomenon. He demonstrates, for example, that when it comes to analysing the impact of repetition on learning outcomes or to

interpreting high repetition rates it is difficult to extrapolate from the experiences of developed countries. High repetition rates in developing countries often reflect a poor learning environment and structural weaknesses: they cannot easily be changed through such policy remedies as automatic promotion.

The author's presentation of the various policy options to reduce grade repetition at different levels of the educational system will particularly interest planners and policy-makers who want to tackle this issue in their own country. It will interest representatives of donor agencies as well, who often make recommendations in this area. Apart from these groups, the booklet should be of interest to teachers, head teachers and teacher trainers who will find in it food for thought and elements to compare their practices with those of others in other countries.

The Editorial Board is particularly grateful to Thomas Owen Eisemon of the World Bank for agreeing to write such an interesting booklet.

Françoise Caillods
Co-General Editor

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Introduction

Repetition rates are a powerful indicator of the performance of an education system. Converted into the cost of producing a graduate, repetition rates provide a measure of internal efficiency of resource allocation. Time-series measurements and/or comparators allow judgments about relative costs and, thus, about trade-off in public investments among sub-sectors or types of training.

Repetition refers here to retention in the same grade or level of study where the normal expectation is either promotion or completion of schooling. Repetition can result from academic failure, insufficient examination marks to advance to the next level of instruction, age, poor attendance or, simply, from lack of local educational opportunities. It may be involuntary or in the case of many rich countries, require the agreement of the student and/or parent. But in many poor countries with restricted opportunities for further studies, repetition of the last grades of primary may often be initiated by the student and/or parent with the approval of school authorities.

The level of repetition can sometimes be startling. In some French-speaking African countries, for instance, high repetition rates push the cost of producing a university graduate in scientific fields up higher than in some developed countries! Nevertheless, it is not clear that the causes of this inefficiency have to do with the operation of higher education institutions. They could, as well, be rooted in the poor preparation of students for higher studies. Likewise, the high repetition rates at the primary level common in many developing countries have complex causes pointing to school failure as well as the school readiness of children.

While repetition rates may signal a problem to policy-makers, they are not self-explanatory. Nor do they usually generate simple policy solutions and investment strategies.

This monograph will review in a first chapter the magnitude of repetition in a range of countries, emphasizing the possibility of under- but also the overreporting of repetition in some cases. It continues by examining in a second chapter the causes and consequences of repetition, looking at the relative importance of home/family and school factors. This final chapter discusses strategies for reducing repetition.

A central argument of this monograph is that there are distinct 'cultures' of repetition shared by countries whose education systems have developed in broadly similar ways. High repetition rates at the primary level, a priority concern for governments and donor agencies, are usually indicative of the efficiency of the sector as a whole. The fundamental causes are systemic. This is evident in the great differences within and between regions. An analysis of educational histories, philosophies, and structures is critical to understanding where and why repetition occurs and how it might be reduced through policy changes and other interventions.

I. Repetition and drop-out: problems in interpretation and estimation

Although repetition, or grade repeating, occurs at all levels, most research has focused on primary education where the proportion of repeaters in African, Latin-American, and Asian countries often exceeds more than a fifth of all students. In Togo, the government estimates that nearly half (46 per cent) of primary school students are repeaters (UNESCO, 1995, Table 3.6; UNESCO, 1991; McGinn et al., 1992). Reported repetition is lower in Asia and Latin America. Nevertheless, according to the International Bureau of Education, the economic cost of primary school repetition in these regions in 1990 might be US$5 billion per year or "more than double the whole of multilateral assistance to the education sector" (Amadio, 1996).

Repetition's relationship to drop-out

The Education For All (Jomtien) initiative, endorsed by most developing countries and donor agencies, focused attention on repetition and drop-out[1] as key impediments to increasing educational access and attainment (Haddad et al., 1990). High repetition rates are often correlated with high drop-out, strengthening the characterization of a public investment in primary education in many developing countries as inefficient (Windham, 1989).

1. Drop-out, in contrast to repetition, is usually voluntary. Unlike repeaters, drop-outs often have not received a significant amount of instruction, especially those who leave school during the first years of the primary cycle.

Table 1. Primary and secondary education repetition by region, 1989/1990

	Primary per cent repeaters (1989)		Secondary per cent repeaters (1990)	
Region	Total	Female	Total	Female
Africa				
Benin	26	27	31	33
Botswana	5	5	1	1
Burkina Faso	17	18	25	-
Burundi	18	18	14	16
Cameroon	29	27	19	19
Cap Verde	24	22	20	20
Central African Rep.	34	34	29	29
Chad	33	35	20	20
Comoros	27	36	33	34
Congo	35	34	44	46
Ethiopia	11	13	-	-
Gabon	31	31	25	-
Ghana	-	-	1	1
Gambia	18	16	2	2
Guinea	18	21	23	24
Guinea-Bissau	42	43	20	22
Madagascar	35	33	20	19
Malawi	21	-	-	-
Mali	30	30	26	27
Mauritania	20	21	11	11
Mauritius	8	8	114	12
Mozambique	25	26	27	29
Niger	13	13	19	21
Rwanda	11	10	7	-
Senegal	16	16	11	13
Swaziland	15	13	10	11
Togo	37	38	37	37
Uganda	14	14	-	-
Tanzania	5	5	-	-
Zaire	21	21	-	-
Zambia		2	-	-
North Africa and the Middle East				
Algeria	7	5	14	11
Egypt	3	-	-	-
Iraq	19	16	32	27

Table 1. (continued)

	Primary per cent repeaters (1989)		Secondary per cent repeaters (1990)	
Region	Total	Female	Total	Female
Latin America and the Caribbean				
Brazil	19	-	-	-
Colombia	12	12	20	20
Costa Rica	11	10	12	10
Cuba	4	-	3	-
Dominican Rep.	17	-	-	-
Ecuador	6	6	-	-
El Salvador	7	7	1	1
Guatemala	4	-	-	-
Guyana	6	5	-	-
Haiti	11	11	8	8
Jamaica	4	3	2	2
Mexico	10	-	2	-
Nicaragua	17	-	6	-
Panama	10	8	8	-
Paraguay	9	8	-	-
Surinam	23	20	-	-
Trinidad and Tobago	4	-	-	-
Uruguay	9	7	-	-
Venezuela	10	8	7	6
East and South-East Asia				
China	7	-	2	-
Indonesia	10	-	1	-
Laos	23	-	10	-
Philippines	2	2	2	-
Thailand	3	-	-	-
South Asia				
Bangladesh	7	-	-	-
Bhutan	17	-	6	-
India	-	4	-	-
Nepal	21	-	9	-
Sri Lanka	7	6	11	11

Note: Countries reporting repetition at the primary or secondary level, including some like Costa Rica which have a policy of automatic promotion.

Source: UNESCO 1991, 'Primary Education: Repetition', *Statistical Issues*, November 1991, 4 & 5; and UNESCO 1993, 'Secondary General Education: Repetition', *Statistical Issues*, May 1993, 2 & 3.

A study of four South-Asian countries suggests that the economic (as opposed to educational) wastage from repetition and drop-out may reach on average more than a third of public expenditure on primary education. In the case of Bhutan, the loss is calculated to be 46 per cent, 15 per cent from repetition alone (Chuard and Mingat, 1996, 7). While repetition in primary school may lead to drop-out as many studies have shown (e.g. Colclough and Lewin, 1993), **the characteristics of drop-outs and repeaters may be very different**. In Central-American, South-Asian as well as in many African countries, for example, gender has an inconsistent relationship to repetition, while girls are usually more likely to drop out of school especially in the early grades (e.g. World Bank, 1996a, 95-7; Gorman and Pollitt, 1992). This is often because of their responsibilities for the care of younger children and the gender division of labour in the household economy.

Interpreting repetition in the framework of school drop-out is a common mistake not only in analyses of educational indicators but also in designing intervention strategies. High repetition rates are an incomplete explanation of drop-out. It follows that measures to reduce repetition such as automatic promotion may not directly address the causes of school drop-out.

The magnitude of repetition

Estimating the real magnitude of repetition has long preoccupied educational planners (Schiefelbein and Grossi, 1981; Schiefelbein, 1989; Amadio, M. 1996, 8-12). Under-reporting of both repetition and drop-out is considered prevalent in developing countries in all regions.

Recent Latin-American studies suggest that the actual repetition rate at the primary level is likely to be a third to twice that reported by governments (Gargiulo and Crouch, 1994; Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1992; 1993). Surveys of grade 6 students in some African countries reveal repetition rates that are a multiple of those reported for the primary cycle in the table above. In Mauritius, for example, the proportion of grade 6 students who report repeating at least once is 25 per cent compared to 8 per cent for the cycle (Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, 1997, 3).

In Zimbabwe, about 40 per cent of grade 6 students were found to be repeaters although a policy of automatic promotion is enforced in earlier grades. In Burundi, only 20 per cent of grade 6 students surveyed had never repeated, notwithstanding the government's policy of automatic promotion and a repetition limit of 10 per cent for the cycle (Eisemon et al., 1993; Schwille, et al., 1991, 6). Census data and household surveys also produce repetition estimates at great variance with official statistics. For educational planners, analysis of enrolment data by age and grade can be a useful alternative to costly surveys (Cuadra, 1989; Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1992; 1993).

The unreliability of official statistics on repetition is partly a reflection of school conditions and the sorry state of educational statistics in many developing countries, generally. International definitions of grade repetition, for instance, are difficult to apply to the multi-grade classrooms typical of rural primary schools in many poor countries. Moreover, despite donor enthusiasm for management information systems, enrolment statistics have little policy importance in many poor countries whose government schools are in a state of financial collapse. However, there are other reasons that make improvement of data quality difficult. Foremost among these is the fact that government policies and school supervision and inspection practices impose sanctions for high repetition and, thus, encourage under-reporting. In the above example of Burundi, school directors are held accountable for repetition rates in excess of the policy target of 10 per cent. A higher rate prompts closer supervision by district school inspectors (Prouty et al., 1991; Eisemon et al., 1993).

In Burundi and many other African countries which have high repetition rates in the primary cycle, students may be allowed no more than one chance to repeat the final year or may be prohibited from sitting for the school-leaving examination again if their marks are not high enough for admission to a government secondary school. In such situations, a common practice is to register the repeater under a different name or in another district.

Over-reporting of repetition, though perhaps less prevalent, occurs in many countries. In rural Honduras and poor and remote regions of some Latin-American countries, students with good academic performance are held in the same grade simply because the

school they attend has not been sanctioned to offer higher grades (Cuadra, 1989; McGinn et al., 1992).

In India, Nepal and other South-Asian countries, **repetition rates in the first grades are inflated by the enrolment of under-age children who may sometimes account for as much as half of reported student enrolment**. This accounts, in part, for gross enrolments sometimes exceeding 100 per cent and also for the large class sizes and high repetition and drop-out in the first three years of schooling. In a 1993 survey of eight low literacy Indian states, almost a third of students in grades four and five had repeated at least one year (World Bank, 1996a, 55; Mehta, 1995). Repetition rates were highest for the transition between the first and second year. How much of this can be attributed to under-age enrolment cannot be easily determined (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1992, Table 158 and 160). Anecdotal evidence from some rural areas in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, indicates that under-age children may comprise a fifth to a half of first grade enrolment (World Bank, personal communication, 1997; Kingdon, 1997, 3310).

Another factor inflating official enrolments in this and some other Indian states is the increasing demand for private schooling in both rural and urban areas (Kingdon, 1997). Students who may have attended government primary schools but who enter unrecognized and/or unaided private schools remain on the registration lists. Taking into account under- (and over-) age students, this produces an over-reporting of enrolment by possibly as much as 20 to 50 per cent (Kingdon, 1997, 3310)! Because sanctioned teaching positions and allocations for classroom construction are based on reported enrolment, and verification procedures are lax, actual enrolments cannot be easily estimated. One consequence is that Indian national planning authorities have applied a 'fudge factor' of an average 17 per cent to discount enrolment-related budget requests, higher or lower depending on the confidence that can be placed in the data generated by the state (World Bank, personal communication, 1997).

II. Cultures of repetition: their causes and manifestations

Whether repetition and drop-out is viewed as a result of school failure or a 'demand side' issue may depend, as McGinn (1992) has observed, on whether the supporting data are generated from household or school surveys. However, whatever relative importance may be assigned to household (or 'demand side') versus school factors, countries vary in ways that seriously undermine many generalizations. Distinct national and regional 'cultures' of repetition exist, reflecting how households interact with schools as well as what happens to children in them.

Household characteristics: the 'demand side'

While the influence of household characteristics on school drop-out is well documented, less is known about how they may affect repetition. Three kinds of household circumstances are potentially important, those relating to: (a) family income; (b) the age, nutrition and health of a child; and (c) the 'readiness' of a child for schooling.

Keeping a child in school increases direct and indirect costs to the household. Even if a child is doing satisfactorily in school, the decision to stay in school must be weighted not only against the often substantial financial sacrifices entailed but also with respect to employment alternatives and the risks of future academic failure and diminished long-term earning potential. In community surveys, repetition and drop-out are typically found to be highest in poor households whose children are usually more likely to exhibit unsatisfactory academic performance and which can least afford to maintain them in school. There is, in fact, much evidence that poverty is closely linked to repetition in primary schools.

In Honduras, for example, families of repeating children had lower incomes and expenditures than those who were promoted, lived in smaller, poorer houses, and were less likely to provide newer school uniforms for their children (McGinn et al., 1992, 20). Yet, as another study of repetition in a Central-American country cautions, even among the most marginalized indigenous highland communities, some "respond differently to identical stimuli" resulting in substantial variations in both repetition and drop-out rates (Carvajal et al., 1993, 69).

Although repetition may be linked to poverty in the lower stage of the primary school cycle, this may not always be true for later years when students sit for the examinations that qualify them for admission to secondary schools. In Kenya (Eisemon, 1988) and especially in Burundi (Eisemon et al., 1993) where repetition is concentrated in the penultimate and final years of primary education, it is the academically talented who are allowed to repeat. Selection favours students who are most likely to pass the competitive school-leaving examinations. Repetition decisions in these circumstances are probably economically selective as well, particularly inasmuch as the costs of repetition are often increased by reliance on private tutoring. At the secondary and higher levels in many if not most developing countries, the private costs are apt to significantly increase to the extent that repetition is affordable for only comparatively well-off families.

Many studies using data collected from teachers and school administrators link repetition to absenteeism and, in turn, to a child's health and nutritional status (Khan and Berstecher, 1988, 20). However, this finding derived mainly from African research is not universal. McGinn (1992) found no relationship between a child's nutritional status and repeating in Honduras, although repeaters missed more days of school. Similarly, age at school entry and gender has been correlated with school failure and repetition in some circumstances, but not in others even in studies of the same country (e.g. Edwards et al., 1997, 21-23; McGinn et al., 1992, 19).

The influence of age, gender, or of child health and nutrition on attendance and school failure is probably mediated by many other contextual factors in the home and school environment. **The richer**

the data set the better our understanding of these factors. In Edwards' Honduran study (1997), for instance, gender was strongly related to repetition mainly when girls' mothers worked or were absent from the home for a substantial time, suggesting that any remedial strategies be highly targeted to such situations.

Among home environment factors, the correspondence between child's mother tongue and the medium of instruction may be the most critical for 'school readiness' and, consequently, for academic performance and repetition (Amadio, 1996, 18 and 19; Eisemon et al., 1989). In the multilingual societies of most developing countries, the language environment of the pre-school child has special importance.

Because children in developing countries usually study in another language in primary school (UNICEF, 1997, 29) – frequently from the first year of instruction – facility in the school language conveys a considerable 'head-start' which may be translated into higher performance. Ability to communicate in the school language may be acquired at home, from social interactions, or as is increasingly the case in developing countries, from government or private pre-schools (Eisemon, 1988; McGinn et al., 1992, 4). In East Africa and especially in South Asia (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1992, Tables 158 and 160), enrolment in pre-schools has expanded dramatically in recent years in both rural and urban areas, though this has been inadequately documented. Private pre-schools in these regions are capturing a very large share of this enrolment not only because of poor conditions in government schools but **because they offer opportunities to acquire facility in foreign languages used for instruction and examination at the upper primary and/or higher levels. A recent study on Guinea has shown that students who repeat the first two grades actually perform better than the others because they are better prepared to learn in French.** In such a situation, repetition may produce a *de facto* lengthening of the normal duration of the primary cycle (Martin and Ta Ngoc, 1993).

Conversely, speaking a different and, generally, a minority language may confer a linguistic handicap to be overcome often under adverse learning conditions. Large class sizes, few textbooks or other instructional resources and poorly trained teachers, which are characteristic of the first years of primary school in many developing

countries, are poor language learning environments (Eisemon et al., 1989; UNICEF, 1997, 29). A child's difficulties in coping with a new language at school may be compounded by the disadvantages of ethnicity (e.g. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 1994), though as with poverty in the home environment, responses to the same stimuli are often quite varied (Edwards et al., 1997).

The school

Much recent repetition research has focused the role of the schools, policies effecting teaching and learning, and teachers' interactions with students from disadvantaged social backgrounds as causes of academic failure leading to repetition and drop-out. In so far as schools are concerned, attention has been drawn in many studies to the higher repetition rates in rural primary schools compared to those in usually more educationally developed urban areas, as well as in schools offering multi-grade teaching and those lacking the teaching staff and other resources to offer the full course of instruction (Amadio, 1996; Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1993). These features characterize schools in remote, educationally under-served areas which generally account for a disproportionately large share of national repetition in developing countries.

The negative impact of school structure and location is often exacerbated by other conditions associated with high repetition rates in the first years of schooling such as large class sizes, poorly trained and inexperienced teachers, high teacher absenteeism and few textbooks and other learning materials (National Planning Commission, 1996, 33; Carvajal et al., 1993; Gorman and Pollitt, 1992; McGinn et al., 1992; Khan and Berstecher, 1988).

In the critical first years of schooling in many Latin-American, African and South-Asian countries poor learning conditions result not just from a paucity of resources but from the common practice of allocating scarce learning resources in favour of the upper years of the primary cycle. In South Asia, for instance, it is not unusual to observe classes of 100 or more students in the first and second years of the primary cycle in schools where the class sizes in the final years of instruction are kept at below 50 students. The best teachers are assigned to teach the older students. From the standpoint

of preparing students for the school leaving/secondary school-entrance examinations, this is an efficient resource allocation strategy (Eisemon et al., 1987). Taking into account the costs of the repetition and drop-out produced, however, it is an inefficient allocation of public expenditure.

School policies relating to teaching, learning and assessment may also play a role in increasing repetition and drop-out rates. Multi-grade teaching is an example. Multi-grade teaching, which has been associated with high repetition (McGinn, 1992, 4), is prevalent in developing countries in almost all regions (UNICEF, 1997, 52, 56-57; Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1993; McGinn et al., 1992; World Bank, 1996a). Despite the fact that in many remote areas it is the often norm, multi-grade teaching is treated in national educational policies as an exceptional practice, i.e. as a transitory condition that will soon disappear as school coverage increases. For this reason, no provision is often made for addressing the needs of multi-grade teaching situations in policies on textbook development or in-service training. Multi-grade teaching has been a permanent rather than a transitory condition in many countries where it is common. Properly supported, multi-grade teaching can lower repetition when students in the same class are able to follow different programmes of study reflecting their interests and aptitudes (Arboleda, Chiappe and Colbert, 1991).

Likewise, the incidence of academic failure leading to repetition may be increased by double shifts, which under many circumstances significantly reduces instructional time (Eisemon et al., 1989, 478-9), as well as by language policies that restrict or preclude the use of the mother tongue (Eisemon and Schwille, 1991, Amadio, 1996, 21). In other words, **the causes of high repetition rates are often imbedded in the policies and strategies employed to increase access and national integration**.

Nowhere is the conflict between efficiency objectives and educational policies and practices more evident than in regard to standards for student performance governing promotion. As implausible as it may seem, given the hierarchical, central control features of most developing country education systems, in many countries, promotion criteria are entirely left up to teachers. **Often no universal minimum standards are applied until the culmination**

of the primary cycle. Nor is any guidance given to teachers to shape their expectations of student performance (e.g. Nepal, see Williams et al., 1993). And learning objectives for the various grades and subjects of instruction are often formulated so vaguely as to be virtually unmeasurable (for a recent survey of primary school learning objectives in the most populous least educationally developed countries, see Thormann, 1997).

This creates much scope for arbitrary assessment. McGinn (1992, 4, 26) concludes in regard to Honduras, that "teachers are inconsistent in the application of Ministry rules ... not all students are promoted, even though all of their final grades are above the Ministry minimum ... teachers' judgments vary in the marks they give and in the strictness which they apply the Ministry's rule". According to Edwards (1993, 17), Honduran teachers employ another implicit rule which is that: "a person should stay in school until finishing sixth grade, or until reaching age 15, whichever comes first". 'Grade repetition', he adds: "is not based on criteria-referenced academic performance. Instead, it reflects performance in relation to school-level norms which aim at a school-wide repetition rate of about 10 per cent. There is therefore scant relation between school quality and repetition rates" (Edwards et al., 1997, 39).

In Brazil and other Latin-American countries, teachers establish 'literacy' – typically in Portuguese or Spanish, second languages for many rural children – as a minimum requirement for promotion to the second grade (Veit, 1990). This sets a potentially high and unrealistic threshold for promotion, depending on what text processing and production skills the teacher considers necessary for further studies. The lack of well-defined standards for promotion is also characteristic of some South-Asian countries. Both India and Nepal, which have very high repetition and drop-out rates, are only now developing skill-based performance standards for the primary cycle.

The absence of objective standards and explicit promotion criteria is not only an impediment to raising overall levels of educational attainment, but also a constraint on quality improvement, generally. And it is a constraint on achieving equity goals too.

In some and perhaps many developing countries, the ill-structured environment for evaluating academic performance leads to promotion decisions that significantly shortens the educational futures of students from the weakest sections of society. Referring again to Honduras but applicable to many developing countries with deeply rooted traditions of social injustice, McGinn (1992) describes how teachers' expectations and their interactions with students are influenced by the family's economic level. This "is one of the factors that contributes to the decision to promote in cases where marks are borderline" (McGinn et al., 1992, 22).

Automatic promotion

Automatic promotion is favoured by many planners as a means of reducing high repetition. It directly acts on the repetition problem and has the additional virtue of simplicity. Moreover, automatic promotion can be shown to actually solve the problem, at least according to some official statistics.

Latin-American countries have experimented with a large variety of approaches to implementing automatic promotion (International Encyclopaedia of National Systems of Education, 1995, 116, 233, 285, 776 and 783). Some, like Bolivia, have abolished all external examinations and have introduced automatic promotion throughout the primary cycle. Others, like Peru, apply automatic promotion only in the first two grades. Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru establish minimum criteria for promotion, including attendance and achievement requirements. Among these, perhaps the most radical may be Bolivia where primary school teachers receive salary supplements if their students are promoted to the next level.

However, automatic promotion policies may have unintended effects. According to Schiefelbein and Wolff (1992, 19-21), "there were near 20 per cent first grade repetition rates in Costa Rica and Venezuela during their experiment with automatic promotion. Principals reported zero repetition after the law was enacted, but no more than half of the repetition rates were eliminated because teachers developed strategies not to promote students while at the same time reporting that they were not officially repeating".

Schiefelbein and Wolff caution that automatic promotion may increase internal efficiency at the cost of reducing overall educational efficiency.

Repetition and achievement

Because performance standards are usually lacking, policy judgments about educational efficiency have been typically reached without taking into account how much children have or have not learned (Lockheed and Hanushek, 1988). In most educational research, repetition is taken as a proxy for academic failure. It denotes wastage of individual, familial, instructional and public resources. This is often accepted as an unexamined fact extrapolated from the experience of many developed countries (Haddad, 1979; Haddad et al., 1990; Schwille et al., 1991, 4 and 5). Only in recent years, for example, have developing country studies of repetition focused on its effects on student achievement.

It is now generally accepted that repetition, a practice intended to strengthen a child's chances to succeed academically, produces little learning benefit and leads to school failure and drop-out (Amadio, 1996, 13). Repetition serves the purpose of persuading students and their parents that they have been given a fair chance and that if they are ultimately unsuccessful, no blame ought to be placed on the school (Spratt, 1988).

On the other hand, **repeating does not always imply a negative judgment about students' abilities**. In Burundi, Kenya, and perhaps other African countries where most repetition occurs in the final years of the primary cycle, repeaters are often selected for their high academic potential (Eisemon et al., 1993; Schwille et al., 1991; Eisemon and Schwille, 1991).

In Burundi, **repetition has been shown to increase learning outcomes and probability of academic success** (Eisemon et al., 1993). The learning gains from repetition, which are much larger than those associated with either maturity or the average increase in achievement attributable to an additional year of instruction, are highest in the metropolitan language used for instruction in the upper stage of the primary cycle (Eisemon et al., 1989; Schwille et al., 1991;

Eisemon et al., 1993). Repeaters become more proficient in French and, thus, are better able to absorb teaching in the academic subjects which comprise the highly selective school-leaving examinations.

That repeaters may derive some learning benefits does not, of course, imply that it is an efficient use of scarce instructional resources. The point is, simply, that the cognitive consequences of repetition are a matter for investigation rather than *ex cathedra* pronouncement.

Cultures of repetition

Contradictory findings in the literature on repetition, some of which have been noted above, illustrate a more fundamental point: education systems vary enormously in terms of the incidence, causes, and consequences of repetition. Most research on repetition has focused on the primary level where public investment is concentrated and internal efficiency issues are paramount. At the secondary level, official statistics must be used for international comparisons.

Reported repetition rates at the secondary level seem to generally follow those at the primary level (UNESCO, 1993, 12). Countries with repetition rates at the primary level of 15 per cent or more have repetition rates at the secondary level above 10 per cent. Conversely, most countries with low primary repetition rates show low repetition at the secondary level. Although repetition rates for higher education are not systematically collected and reported, it is likely that they also follow the pattern for lower levels. This leads to an important general finding; i.e. **high/low repetition rates have systemic causes**.

Across regions, African countries have the highest reported repetition at both the primary and secondary levels. The reported rates for most African countries at the primary level are higher than for East-Asian and Middle-Eastern countries and about as high as the estimated actual rates for the poorest Latin-American countries (UNESCO, 1991; Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1993; Gargiulo and Crouch, 1993; Edwards et al., 1997). The ten countries with the highest overall repetition rates are in Africa (see *Table 1*).

Most of them have repetition rates at the primary and secondary levels in excess of 25 per cent (UNESCO, 1993, 12).

Within the African region, repetition is highest in Francophone and Lusophone countries. None of the 12 African countries with the highest repetition rates are Anglophone. In the Latin-American and Caribbean region, the rates are lowest among Anglophone countries (Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1992, 4). A general hypothesis can be formulated. Countries which share educational traditions usually inherited from the colonial period, have similar practices in regard to selection and promotion which lead to differential repetition rates.

In colonial Africa, in contrast to either Asia or Latin America, education systems developed from the 'bottom up', i.e. from primary to higher with the establishment of colleges and universities mainly after the Second World War (for a comprehensive summary of the situation at independence, see Hailey, 1957). With some exceptions like the Belgian Congo, colonial governments in Africa had the dominant role in the provision and financing of education and where the private sector was important as a delivery system, its activities were closely regulated. Grants-in-aid schemes were used to control the development of most private schools.

Colonial education was largely financed on a 'pay as you go' basis, mainly through direct taxes and user fees. Though unpopular with subject populations, these financing mechanisms were comprehensive, progressive and provided a sustainable basis for growth. Their notable weakness was that they restricted expansion and also perpetuated significant inequalities in access to education. During decolonization, these methods were abandoned in favour of taxation of incomes in the small fragile modern sector, customs and excise duties, taxes on commodity production, and in the social sectors, increased reliance on colonial welfare and development funds.

After independence, most African governments abolished the hated hut and poll taxes and many other forms of direct taxation and pledged themselves to providing universal, free primary education (UNESCO, 1961). Understandably, secondary and higher education were a higher priority for governments and donors because of the need to Africanize the civil service and address critical high level

manpower shortages (Harbison and Myers, 1964). Since the costs of academic secondary and higher education continued to be borne by government, this usually meant continued rationing of educational opportunities for primary school graduates. As their numbers grew in the 1970s and 1980s, access to further education became more selective, notwithstanding the increasing proportion of public resources going to academic secondary and higher education. At the primary level, repetition rates in the final years began to climb in most African countries (UNESCO, 1991; 1993; Lockheed and Verspoor, 1991, 21-38).

In brief, the high repetition rates in all sub-sectors are a structural consequence of the preeminent role of the state in the sector, exacerbated in recent years by the collapse of un-sustainable mechanisms of public finance throughout the region. **High repetition has become a normal feature of African education systems**. Consequently, in most African countries, no stigma of failure is usually attached to the term 'school leaver' which signifies some significant level of academic achievement.

In Francophone Africa, opportunities for academic secondary and higher education in the colonial period were even more restricted than in Anglophone countries. This is still largely true as most Francophone African countries continue to lag behind their Anglophone counterparts in gross enrolments in post basic education (UNESCO, 1995, c-233). However, economic, political and educational crises in the 1990s have prompted radical changes in Francophone Africa leading to more diversification not only in the financing and provision of secondary education but even in countries like Senegal and the Cameroon, in higher education as well.

In addition to this structural difference, **Francophone African countries share a tradition of equating selectivity with high instructional standards**. From the school through to the university level, high failure rates signify rigorousness and high expectations of performance; in sum, "proof of quality" (World Bank, 1996b, 1b, 1). Just the opposite interpretation is usually drawn in most Anglophone countries where high failure rates suggest inefficiency, poor teaching, and inadequate management and supervision.

These differences between Francophone and Anglophone African countries are perhaps best revealed in how examinations are used to regulate transition from one stage of education to the next. In Francophone African countries, a pass mark in the 'baccalauréat' examination confers a virtual entitlement to a place at a higher level. In Anglophone countries, a pass mark is a necessary qualification, a minimum requirement for promotion, but it does not necessarily generate an admission to higher studies (Eisemon and Schwille, 1991). Typically, the higher the educational level, the greater the discrepancy between the standards leading to the school-leaving qualification and those required for promotion to the next stage. An illustration is the practice in Uganda (Eisemon and Salmi, 1993), Zimbabwe and many other Anglophone African countries of raising the 'A level' scores for entrance to a government university when the cohort of eligible students increases, widening the gap between the pass standard and the minimum actually necessary to continue studies.

Student flows in many Francophone African countries are greatly influenced by reliance on the 'baccalauréat' as an instrument to certify graduation from academic secondary school as well as to determine admission to university. Unwilling politically to change the requirements for university entry, and unable to accelerate expansion financed by state subsidies, governments encourage selectivity at key transition points in the primary and lower secondary levels. Gross enrolment rates in Tunisia, for example, range from 101 per cent in primary education to 45 per cent and 13 per cent in lower and upper secondary education, respectively (World Bank, 1996b, 4). As in much poorer Francophone African countries, high repetition and drop-out rates result in low completion rates at all levels (World Bank, 1996b, 1), though the country has achieved much greater primary school coverage than most others. In most Francophone and some Anglophone African countries like Mauritius, repetition is very high in the grades where selection takes place at the upper primary and lower secondary levels, with student flows reflecting the 'backwash' effects of extreme selectivity.

A characteristic of Latin-American countries, shared with many South-Asian countries, is high repetition and drop-out in the first years of primary schooling. Afterward, school survival rates generally begin to increase, except in some instances for over-age students, who

having repeated one or more grades may be encouraged to drop out when they reach the school-leaving age (Edwards et al., 1997, 39 and 40). As is evident above, most investigations of drop-out and repetition in Latin America focus on family background/ethnicity effects and the instructional conditions and practices that reinforce them.

Similarly, the repetition and drop-out issue in South-Asian countries is conceptualized mainly as an equity issue affecting well-defined populations. It is students from scheduled castes, tribal, and other disadvantaged groups (including and especially girls), who account for most repeaters and drop-outs (Kurien, 1983; Government of India, 1993). In both Latin America and South Asia, long established traditions of social injustice and cultural subordination are held responsible for the low levels of internal efficiency.

The importance of the social context of repetition and drop-out is also apparent in comparisons of English-Caribbean, Latin-American and particularly Central-American countries. The average educational attainment of the population in English-Caribbean countries is much greater - about an additional year of education - because of higher internal efficiency (Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1992, 2 and 3). Cultural and economic segmentation is less visible and while the educational development of English-Caribbean societies has been shaped by slavery, schooling has been an instrument for achieving equity and social mobility.

The broad regional and sub-regional variations described here conceal significant diversity between and within countries, and give further support to the conclusion that few if any law-like generalizations can be developed about the causes and consequences of rep ition and drop-out.

III. Strategies for reducing repetition

Research on repetition and drop-out is rich in prescriptions for policy changes and government interventions to improve schools and increase school readiness of children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Two features of effective intervention strategies are usually emphasized: (a) comprehensiveness in addressing the educational as well as familial causes of repetition and drop-out; and (b) the importance of prioritizing, packaging, and fine tuning of interventions for particular populations or circumstances. A third requirement may be added: the need for sectoral approaches to increasing educational efficiency (Amadio, 1996, 22-26).

Comprehensive strategies for home/school interventions

The benefits of a multi-pronged strategy have been documented in countries that have succeeded in reducing repetition and drop-out. According to Schiefelbein and Wolff (as reported in Amadio,1996, 22), repetition at the primary level in Chile and Uruguay has been significantly reduced through concerted government interventions. Most of these have focused on improving the quality of schooling through teacher training and textbook distribution. In the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, which ranks near the bottom of states in terms of educational attainment and literacy, primary school participation has recently increased and repetition has been significantly reduced due to multiple government interventions including adult literacy, mid-day meals, better school facilities, more textbooks, in-service teacher training, and greater community involvement in schooling (World Bank, 1997, 18 and 19).

Repetition research has generated a plethora of home/family environment-focused strategies for improving the school readiness of

children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. They range from nutritional and health interventions in early childhood to ensure normal cognitive development to pre-school education, parent education, public subsidies to poor families to defray the direct and opportunity costs of education especially for girls, and abolition of child labour (Myers, 1992; Amadio, 1996; UNICEF, 1995; McGinn et al., 1992; Schiefelbein and Wolf, 1992; 1993; UNICEF, 1997).

However, **the impact of any one of these interventions on target behaviours is apt to be small unless it is combined with other related measures**. For example, nutrition and child-health interventions, in school-age children or in early childhood, are more effective and their impact more likely to be sustainable when they are combined with parent and pre-school education (Myers, 1992a; 1992b; del Rosso and Marek, 1996; Colletta et al., 1996). For the same reasons, the effects of pre-school education and nutritional and health interventions can be magnified when the family rather than the child is the focus of intervention (Bhattacharya and Dave, 1991; Colclough and Lewin, 1993).

Interventions to 'educationally empower' parents and communities have also been shown to be effective in reducing repetition and drop-out. In several Indian states, the community's participation in school mapping or micro planning has been useful, not just for identifying drop-outs and repeaters, but for raising awareness and exerting social pressure in favour of school participation (Educational Consultants India, Ltd., 1997, 8). Interventions to increase community involvement in school management can address parental concerns about teacher absenteeism, for example, that frequently lead to powerlessness and social acceptance of repetition and drop-out (National Planning Commission, 1996; McGinn et al., 1992). In India, the establishment and strengthening of village education committees – facilitated by community implementation of micro planning – are a central component of the government's strategy to increase primary school access and retention (World Bank, 1997, 9).

Strategies for reducing academic failure by improving school-effectiveness are well known and have been extensively studied (Levin and Lockheed, 1993). Government and donor investments in

quality improvement now focus on increasing performance, enhancing inputs such as textbooks, learning materials, and in-service teacher training. More attention is now being given to school policies that influence when children go to school, how much instruction they receive, what language is used in the classroom, standards of instruction and assessment, and promotion criteria and practices.

For many years, these policy domains were largely unstudied by policy analysts as the implications either touched on political and cultural sensitivities as in the case of language policies and promotion criteria, or in lowering the school age and introducing pre-school education, which involved incremental increases in public and private expenditure. **Moreover, in contrast to conclusions drawn from quantitative measurement of the impact of quality inputs, analyses of policies that effect the actual content of schooling yield insights rather than formulae to guide investments.**

Language policies are a good illustration. Extensive research has been carried out on mother tongue and second language teaching. The best advice to policy-makers is that educational benefits from mother-tongue teaching depend on a great many circumstances, among them, whether the mother tongue is a minority language, the social, political, economic and education role of the second language, the linguistic diversity of the classroom, the availability and quality of mother-tongue teaching materials and other factors (Genessee, 1987). Because the educational and social context is so important, no prescriptions can be offered. Often, the best language policies are those that allow local choice or permit wide latitude for implementation (Eisemon et al., 1989; Eisemon and Schwille, 1991).

Prioritizing, packaging, and fine-tuning interventions[2]

To guide policy-makers and donors better, some researchers have attempted to prioritize policy and investment interventions in quality improvements according to their cost-effectiveness or marginal contribution to changes in learning outcomes and, presumably, to repetition reduction.

Schiefelbein and Wolff (1992, 30 and 31; 1993), for instance, list and propose criteria for rank ordering some 33 strategies for reducing repetition in Latin-American countries. These comprise policies to foster more learning like bilingual education, increasing the supply of textbooks and other teaching inputs, as well as for enhancing school-readiness through pre-schooling and other home/family interventions. Effectiveness (feasibility and impact on achievement and promotion) as well as cost-effectiveness (effectiveness related to incremental unit costs) are given as ranking criteria. However, Schiefelbein and Wolff (1992; 1993) acknowledge that the current state of research does not permit firm conclusions about the ordering of alternative interventions and that in any event, the optimal policy/investment package would vary depending on country circumstances.

2. While government educational policies and interventions have a crucial role to play in reducing repetition and drop-out, social, political and economic factors are often more important. Historically, the educational marginalization or development of different societies may be little affected by government educational initiatives. The educational under-development of the Muslim communities of the Kenyan coast illustrates this point. These communities were the first in East Africa to be exposed to western schooling and are still among the least educationally developed in the region. This is not for lack of government interventions throughout the colonial and independence periods. Coastal Muslims largely resisted expansion of western schooling and wage labour which together were responsible for the destruction of their plantation economy. In recent years, participation and retention rates have greatly increased, however. The critical factor is probably the competition for land resulting from the government's abolition of tribal reserves in the 1970s. For many Muslims sending their children to school and into wage employment to protect their land against encroachments has now become a strategy for cultural survival (Eisemon, 1988; Eisemon, forthcoming).

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Table 2. Strategies for reducing repetition

	Policies	**Investments**
Home/Family Intervention objectives		
Increase equity.	Lower or remove fees.	Scholarships for poor families.
Increase school responsiveness.	Strengthen parent involvement in school management.	Training for members of parent/school committees.
	Strengthen local control of school finance.	
	Enforce child labour laws.	
Increase school readiness.		Parent education programmes.
		Community health and nutrition programmes.
		Infant stimulation programmes.
School based objectives.		
Increase school readiness.	Lower age at entry.	
	Allow state supported pre-school education.	Pre-school programmes.
		Mid-day meals programmes.
		Clean water and sanitation.

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		School and classroom construction/ rehabilitation.
Increase participation.	Enforce compulsory attendance laws.	Enrolment drives and community school mapping.
	Link school financing to attendance and number of days of instruction. Fund institutions on the basis of outputs.	
	Lower or eliminate school fees.	
	Add grades or introduce cluster schools.	More teachers/classroom construction.
	Introduce salary incentives and other measures to deploy teachers to remote areas.	Construction of teacher hostels in remote areas.
		Learning materials and in-service training programmes to support multi-grade teaching.
Increase opportunity to learn/improve teaching.	Reduce class sizes.	More teachers.
	Lengthen school year/day.	More teachers.
	Raise teachers' qualifications and provide incentives for in-service training.	Pre- and in-service teacher education programmes and teachers advisory/ resource centres.
	Increase teacher/school supervision.	Inservice training for school directors and inspectors.

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	Provide free textbooks for girls and children from poor families.	Increased textbook supply and distribution.
Improve assessment.	Establish competency-based curricular objectives	New curricula and textbooks.
	Introduce criterion-referenced testing and subject-wise promotion.	Increase capacity of assessment units and exam councils.
	Introduce performance-based financial incentives for schools.	

Note: The above is drawn in part from:
Schiefelbein, E. and Wolff, L. 1992. *Repetitions and inadequate achievement in Latin America's primary schools: magnitudes, causes, relationships and strategies*. Latin America Technical Human Resources Division Paper No. 31. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 30;
Schiefelbein, E. and L. Wolff, L. 1993, "Repetition and inadequate achievement in Latin America's primary schools: magnitudes, causes, relationships and strategies", *UNESCO/ORLEAC Bulletin*, No.30, pp.17-41.

In an earlier study of internal efficiency in the educationally disadvantaged north-eastern region of Brazil, Harbison and Hanushek (1992) employed cost-effectiveness criteria to prioritize strategies for reducing repetition, though they focused mainly on the cost-effectiveness of various investments. A World Bank analysis of cost-effective strategies for quality improvement of primary education in India (1996a) takes a similar approach. It finds that increasing the number of highly trained teachers, floor space per pupil, and provision of learning materials are among the most cost-effective investments. Reducing class sizes and lengthening the school day or school year was found to be less cost-effective, although increasing teaching time had the most impact on learning outcomes (World Bank, 1996a, 78-87). Regression analyses have also been used by other researchers (Chuard and Mingat, 1996; Edwards et al., 1997) to inform policy and investment choices and to devise packages of interventions. However, the findings of such analyses are often counter-intuitive as in the World Bank example, and the preferred investments often yield very little by way of learning gains in absolute terms.

Despite the compelling arguments for establishing a rational basis for choice, the difficulty with these approaches rests with the well-established fact that, as noted in the preceding discussion of the causes and consequences of repetition, populations will react differently to identical stimuli or conditions. This may be one reason why an evaluation of Indian school-incentive programmes which incorporate a package of cost-effective home and school-based interventions produced mixed results in so far as increasing student achievement and reducing repetition are concerned (World Bank, 1997, 231-237). **Effective packaging involves tailoring of the mix of intervention strategies to the needs and characteristics of specific populations**.

Sectoral approaches

Where high repetition is characteristic of an education system, interventions must be sectoral to be effective. Efforts to reduce high repetition in the early years of primary education through automatic promotion, for example, will simply raise repetition rates in subsequent years if access to lower secondary education remains constrained as countries like Burundi have learned (Eisemon and Schwille, 1991; Schiefelbein and Wolff, 1992, 20). This is also a concern in India where there are signs that much progress is being made at expanding coverage and increasing retention in the drive to achieve universal primary education by the year 2002. The government's strategy for reducing repetition and drop-out focuses on eventually linking investments in quality inputs such as in-service teacher training and instructional materials to measurable progress in improving coverage and retention in the lower grades. However, states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh are also finding that sustaining enrolment growth requires increased attention to upper primary and lower secondary education (World Bank, personal communication, 1997).

Disrupting the delicate policy 'ecology' of an education system can have unforeseen consequences. In nearby Kenya, primary school repetition rates fell and coverage and attainment increased as access to secondary education was expanded in the late 1970s and 1980s. Because of the slow growth in university places, repetition increased at 'O' and 'A' levels, prompting the government in the mid-1980s to

lengthen the primary cycle, shorten the secondary cycle, and add a fourth year to degree studies while expanding the number of university places (Eisemon, 1988).

This temporarily addressed the secondary school problem but soon led to a massive and unsustainable expansion of higher education enrolments. That, in turn, precipitated crisis conditions throughout the system in the 1990s, resulting in a decline in primary school participation (Eisemon, forthcoming).

Likewise, the introduction of criteria-referenced or subject-wise promotion – policies for reducing repetition from primary through higher education – is difficult to introduce successfully in a piecemeal manner. Requirements for progression and certification must be articulated with those used for selection. The practical implications can be profound as at the higher, secondary and even upper primary levels, instructional requirements must be modularized allowing choice and individualization of learning packages. Such changes may involve profound rethinking of both teaching and assessment practices. Many other policy measures proposed to reduce repetition like bi-lingualism and multi-grade teaching also have broad implications.

It is rarely possible to effectively focus interventions on a sub-sector, even one as important as primary education, without taking their sectoral impact into account.

IV. Summary

Reducing repetition should be a high priority for policy-makers in many developing countries because of the substantial wastage of resources involved. Ascertaining the magnitude, causes, and consequences of repetition is seldom straightforward, however. Official estimates often understate the problem, but sometime also overreport the number of repeaters. Improving measurement of repetition itself requires a better understanding of its causes.

There is a high degree of consensus in repetition research on the importance of home/family and school factors. Poverty, ethnicity, gender, remoteness combine with poor instructional conditions, bad teaching, and arbitrary assessment of student performance to produce high repetition rates. But this masks much variation between and within countries.

Comparative studies indicate that the cognitive consequences of repetition and its relationship to academic failure also vary in ways that reveal distinct regional and sub-regional 'cultures of repetition.' In African countries, which have the highest repetition rates, repetition does not necessarily signify academic failure. Students with academic potential repeat to improve their chances at passing the very selective entrance examinations for secondary and higher education. High repetition rates are a systemic characteristic, especially in Francophone African countries. In Latin-American and South-Asian countries, the highest rates repetition are usually found in the first years of schooling. For historical and social reasons, repetition is concentrated among children of cultural minorities and the poor.

Repetition research is rich in policy and investment prescriptions. The sheer volume of choices is daunting. Efforts to prioritize interventions in terms of cost-effectiveness or more simply, with

respect to impact on learning outcomes, are of little real help to policy-makers even when the supporting research evidence is gathered at a regional level. The causes and characteristics of high repetition require localized remedies. Success in reducing repetition is associated with multi-pronged strategies addressing home and school conditions, tailoring and targeting policies and investments to specific populations and circumstances, and also with formulating interventions in a sectoral context.

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The booklet

Repetition rates are a powerful measure of educational efficiency. This paper reviews the magnitude, causes and consequences of high repetition. Attention is drawn to the prevalence of under reporting, the importance of home/family and school factors, as well as to the contribution of repetition to academic failure and drop out. Nevertheless, these generalizations require considerable qualification. Repetition rates are sometimes over reported. While repetition is usually greatest among children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, marginalized groups react differently to the same conditions and stimuli.

Global trends conceal distinct regional and sub-regional 'cultures' of repetition. High repetition rates in African countries, especially in Francophone countries, perhaps best illustrate the systemic characteristics of repetition.

Although repetition research is rich in policy and investment prescriptions, it is difficult to prioritize interventions because of their interrelatedness and the importance of contextual factors. Effectiveness requires comprehensiveness in home/family and school-based interventions, targeting and tailoring of these interventions to specific circumstances and addressing the sectoral implications of policy changes.

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